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President Bush Seeks \$1.3 Billion Budget for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

President George W. Bush's almost \$1.3 billion 2004 budget request for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service represents a continuing commitment to protecting America's natural resources and supporting community partners in conservation. Among the key features of this budget package is a \$25.5 million increase to care for the National Wildlife Refuge System as it embarks on its second century and a continued commitment to conservation partnerships through the Cooperative Conservation Initiative. Strong budget increases in such areas as Fisheries and Migratory Birds help to round out a package that will benefit the Service, its many partners, its trust lands and species, and the American public.

"This budget demonstrates the President's commitment to managing and conserving the natural resources that belong to all of the American people in partnership with others," said Interior Secretary Gale Norton. "While other events on the national and international stage might grab the headlines, this Administration continues to support the often unsung collaborative work that protects and enhances our fisheries, strengthens our National Wildlife Refuge System, recovers species, and increases opportunities for citizens across our country to enjoy their public lands."

The 2004 budget continues the Secretary's vision of cooperative conservation through a revised Cooperative Conservation Initiative that focuses on existing successful programs that build resource protection partnerships. The Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife, North American Wetlands Joint Venture, Coastal and Refuge Challenge Cost-share programs are all included in this year's Cooperative Conservation Initiative. The budget provides \$15 million in increased funding for these programs, including \$9 million for Partners, \$3 million for Joint Ventures and \$3 million for Refuge Challenge Cost-share.

The Fisheries program is to receive almost \$104 million under the Administration's budget request. This represents an increase of nearly \$9 million over the 2003 budget to help implement the program's "Vision for the Future." This figure includes \$5 million to carry out priority fisheries recovery and restoration activities.

"Sport fishing is important to millions of Americans, not only as a recreational activity but as a family experience that strengthens links between children, parents and grandparents and, in doing so, helps guide future generations of our citizens," said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Steve Williams. "The Fisheries program's 'Vision for the Future,' with the backing of this Presidential budget request, will help the Service better support the sportfishing community, which has historically been one of this agency's most valuable and valued partners. It also will help efforts to restore imperilled species."

Last year's discovery of the invasive northern snakehead fish in Maryland waters focused national attention on the risk of such introduced species to our waterways and to the native fish that depend upon them. The Administration's 2004 budget request recognizes such threats, and includes an increase of \$1 million for the control of aquatic invasive species, such as Asian carp in the Mississippi River drainage and Asian swamp eels in Florida's Everglades.

Building on last year's historic \$57 million increase, the President's budget asks for a \$25.5 million increase to help the National Wildlife Refuge System protect its trust resources, improve public access to recreation, and better serve surrounding communities. Refuge Operations funding increases will address the highest priority operation and maintenance needs with an increase of \$11.6 million over the 2003 budget. Additional requests include \$5 million toward start-up costs on new and expanding refuges (including Vieques and Don Edwards); increased funding (\$2.1 million) to combat invasive species on refuges (including nutria, the invasive tamarisk cedar and the giant aquatic salina fern); support for the development of additional Comprehensive Conservation Plans (\$2 million increase); and \$500,000 to take proactive steps toward controlling the advance of Chronic Wasting Disease on refuge lands.

Increased funding is also requested to meet the resource protection needs of the Endangered Species program and to address its growing litigation-driven workload. Additional funding (a total of more than \$3 million more than last year) will be available to address listing actions required by court order or settlement agreement. And, recognizing that the goal of the Endangered Species Act is not listing but recovery, the President has requested a \$2 million increase to fund recovery actions needed to stabilize populations of critically imperilled species, as well as to provide the final "push" needed to achieve the delisting of species that are already approaching full recovery.

The requested budget for Law Enforcement is almost \$ 53 million. The budget reflects an increase of \$1 million that will allow the hiring of nine additional wildlife inspectors in order to better control the illegal trade in protected species. Manatee protection efforts in Florida will also be supported by a \$500,000 increase in funds to decrease the risk of boat strikes and enforce waterway speed zones on refuges and in sanctuary areas.

The requested budget for Land Acquisition is reduced by \$29.6 million. This reduction reflects the Administration's commitment to properly care for the lands already in the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The President's 2004 budget continues to support active participation on the part of the States and other partners in resource conservation efforts. To this end, the budget provides \$246.2 million for five Service grant programs that facilitate State and local conservation efforts. Recognizing the opportunities for conservation of endangered and threatened species through partnerships with private landowners, the budget includes \$50 million to continue the Landowner Incentive and Private Stewardship programs. While decreased by \$2 million from 2003, the \$87 million request for the Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund provides an additional \$2 million for Habitat Conservation Plan planning assistance, and is an increase of almost 300% above the 2000 funding level.

Multinational Species Conservation Fund requested budgets will, for the most part, remain constant with those of 2002 and 2003, with \$1 million each going to support international efforts to protect African elephants; rhinoceroses and tigers; Asian elephants; and great apes. The exception is an increase of \$2 million over the 2003 budget to implement additional neotropical migratory bird conservation projects in the Western Hemisphere.

The Service continues to follow the President's management agenda for improving management and performance of the Federal government, practicing the Secretary's vision for citizen-centered management excellence. The budget embodies this progress by focusing resources on fulfilling the goals in the Department's new draft unified strategic plan, and providing budget increases to successful programs like the Partners for Fish and Wildlife

program.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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